MONSTER BIRD THAT CARRIES OFF HUMAN BEINGS!

BY JACK PEARL / ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN McDERMOTT

A phantom killer roams our skies. Is it a freak of nature—or the Indians' legendary Thunderbird?

The supernatural and the superhuman have exerted a powerful attraction on people through the ages. The ancient Greeks feared their one-eyed Cyclops and half-man, half-bull Minotaur. Europe, in the Middle Ages, was awed by tales of vampires and werewolves—both of which still get occasional testimonials today. In Asia, the legendary monster is the phantom "Abominable Snowman," the reputed man-beast, shaggy-haired and ten feet high, who roams the snowy wastes of the Himalayas. A few years ago, the respected and serious sportsman, Sir Edmund Hillary, who conquered the world's highest mountain, Mt. Everest, led a costly expedition into the Himalayas to try to capture a **yeti,** as the Snowman is locally known. ■ Here in the United States, one of the most popular 20th Century myths or mysteries—according to your preference—is the "flying saucer." But recently there have been reports of still another terrifying apparition—a bird of prey so monstrously large and

ART BY JOHN MCDERMOTT

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Here in the United States, one of the most popular 20th century myths or mysteries—according to your preference—is the "flying saucer." But recently there have been reports of still another terrifying apparition—a bird of prey so monstrously large and strong that it can carry off a human being or dive into an airplane hard enough to cause a catastrophic crash. This flying beast—often called the "Thunderbird"—is more than a legend. It has been seen by eyewitnesses, although no one is sure of its species. Few people have gotten close to it and lived....

In 1933, a doctor from a mining camp near Ivanpah, California, reported he had been summoned to an isolated

farmhouse to attend a man, a woman, and a three-year-old child, all seriously lacerated about the head and torso. The man and his wife, badly shaken but in complete control of their senses, told a story that made the short hairs bristle on the doctor's neck.

The husband had been working in a field when he heard his wife scream. Running back to the house, he rounded the front porch and saw a horrifying sight. About 40 yards from the house, where his child had been playing, a terrible struggle was taking place between his wife and the biggest bird he had ever seen. The child was lying between his wife's legs screaming and covered with blood, while she swung a stove poker in an attempt to fend off a vicious attack by the creature. The bird—it looked like a giant vulture or eagle—was ripping at his wife with its claws and huge beak. One swipe of a wing, which the man estimated to be at least 12-feet long, sent her sprawling. The husband picked up an axe that lay on the porch and joined the battle. He got in one good blow—"right in the shoulder joint, and I must have struck an artery because the blood spurted like a fountain." Enraged by the wound, the bird attacked with renewed fury, grabbed the axe with its beak and seized the man with its sharp talons by the shoulder and buttocks. According to the man's story, the great bird then lifted him 10- or 12-feet off the ground as he battled to grab the monster's neck with his hands. He was unsuccessful, but abruptly the bird dropped him and flew off. He assumed that the wound he had inflicted on the bird had weakened it—an assumption that was later borne out when the skeptical doctor visited the scene of the encounter. In the doctor's opinion, there was more blood on the ground than could have been shed by any three human beings—even if they had bled to death. That a violent and vicious battle had taken place, he had no doubt. He also attested to the fact that the wounds on the three victims—who all survived—could only have been inflicted by enormous talons.

An Indian who had accompanied the doctor to the farmhouse said that for generations big birds had been swooping down from the high mountain peaks and carrying away Indian children and livestock.

"What kind of birds?" the doctor asked. "Eagles?"

The Indian shook his head. "Thunderbirds," he said.

Only two years ago, there was another sighting, on the US east coast.

In May, 1961, a New York businessman was piloting his private Piper Cub up the Hudson River Valley when an object, which he first thought was another plane, dove at him out of the sun, "like a fighter plane making a pass." Blinded by the glare, he was unable to make a positive identification at that instant. Outraged, he turned his plane to get a glimpse of the other ship, which had climbed up behind him at about "five o'clock," in Air Force jargon. To his amazement, the sky was empty except for a huge bird, now about a third of a mile off, drifting lazily "with scarcely any movement of its wings." It is difficult to estimate size in the sky, without any known object available for comparison, but he recognized that it was "a damned big bird, bigger than an eagle. For a moment I doubted my sanity because it actually looked more like a pterodactyl out of the prehistoric ages...."

Frightened, he turned the plane again and headed away at full throttle. The bird flew after him for 10 minutes, keeping up with the plane easily, though making no effort to close the distance between them. At last, its curiosity apparently satisfied, it swooped off in another direction, to the man's relief.

When he later related the incident to his family and friends, they advised him either to be fitted with glasses or to give up flying!

Similar experiences have been reported by scores of private pilots, as well as veteran commercial pilots, in which mammoth birds have been sighted. One pilot had this to say, alluding to the extreme difficulty of estimating size and distance while high above the earth: "You see another airliner in the distance and it may look no bigger than a pigeon. The same thing is true of birds. There's no reliable way of judging the size of another object in the air unless it's almost on top of you. In 1947, I almost collided with a bird over Arizona. My co-pilot and I couldn't believe our eyes. It came down from the left and passed beneath us, just missing us by a hair. There was no doubt about my judgment that time. The thing had a wingspan of at least 30 feet... Afterward I got to thinking. God knows how many monsters, just as big, there are flying in the air over the isolated mountain regions... You just don't realize it unless they get close to you...and I never want to get that close to another one again!"

The experience of this pilot suggests an obvious question: If

the bird and the plane had not missed by that hair's breadth, what would the consequences have been? More to the point, can a bird actually cause an air disaster?

Collisions between birds and aircraft are more frequent than is commonly believed. In 1957, a goose crashed through the cockpit windshield of a DC-3 and injured the co-pilot. The plane landed without incident. In 1960, a flock of starlings was sucked into the engine intakes of an American Airlines Electra taking off from Boston's Logan Airport, causing a tragic crash. The files of the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) abound with reports of similar freakish accidents.

Shortly after noon on November 23, 1962, a United Airlines Viscount was making a routine approach to Washington, DC, International Airport. It was a bright, sunny day with unlimited visibility and minimum air turbulence. Radio communication between the plane and the Washington control tower was normal. There was not the slightest hint of trouble, much less total disaster. Then, abruptly, the Viscount disappeared from the tower's radar screen.

On a farm in Ellicott City, Maryland, a boy looked up from his chores to witness a sight he had never expected to see: a huge airplane diving vertically toward the woods to the southwest of the farm. As he watched, paralyzed with horror, the plane crashed and exploded in the trees with an impact that caused the ground to tremble beneath his feet.

On November 25, in an official statement to the press, George Van Epps, chief of safety investigation for the CAB, announced: "We have evidence of a bird strike on the (plane's) horizontal stabilizers and associated elevators, both left and right... The fact is we found both left and right stabilizers back in the flight path, which indicates in-flight separation...."

Both halves of the 35-foot, all-metal stabilizer were found almost a half-mile behind the crash. And on both were matted the blood, feathers, and flesh of an unidentified bird.

But what kind of bird was it that could disable a huge aircraft like the Viscount turboprop—built to endure the stress and strain of high speed, the giant force of wind and storm—disable

it so badly that it would spin out of control to disaster? It is a question that air experts and ornithologists alike have been asking themselves—and each other—and, so far, none of the answers have satisfied anyone.

Leon Tanguay, safety director of the CAB, declared about the bird theory: "I have never known of such a thing to happen. I'm not sure that this happened!" But neither he nor anyone else can explain the feathers, blood and flesh on that stabilizer torn off by terrific impact.

The Chief Medical Examiner of Maryland, who examined the gory remains of the creature plastered to the stabilizer, said cautiously: "I've got a foot-square piece of the carcass. It's white with down below the feathers—it couldn't be anything else but a swan!" He didn't convince the investigators from CAB and FAA. One of them said, off the record: "There's talk that it was a swan or a goose. But only one bird! It doesn't add up."

So unconvinced were the investigators that Army helicopters were assigned to hedge-hop the fatal route the plane had followed from Baltimore to Washington "in an effort to find more carcasses or remains that might indicate this to be a flock instead of a single bird," explained Mr. Van Epps. "They found nothing," he added uneasily.

Among pilots, civil and military, the swan or goose theory produced outright contempt. A former World War II fighter pilot, now flying for a commercial airline, said, "That swan would have to be straight out of a science-fiction movie.

Take a look at the stabilizers on a big plane sometime. They're built to take strain. They have to be. Without the stabilizer, the pilot has no control. During the war I saw big Flying Fortresses come back with their stabilizers shot to hell by machine guns and cannon shells. Nobody can tell me that a swan could tear one loose from the ship!"

Another pilot—now an aeronautical engineer—asks a more intriguing question: "What I'd like to know is how this 'bird' managed to get through the arc of the props and hit the tail? You look at the design of the Viscount. It would almost be impossible unless...? Unless we assume that it actually swooped in from the side, behind the wings, was able to buck the slipstream, then deliberately dove into the tail section. It's ridiculous! What kind

In 1962, an airliner mysteriously crashed near Washington, DC. Investigation produced evidence it had been hit by an enormous bird.

of a bird could do that!"

What kind of bird, indeed? A bird that could rip a section of solid metal off the tail assembly, a slab of metal 35-feet long and 238 square yards in area, rip it off like a slice of balsawood off a child's toy plane?

The answer seems obvious. A bird big enough to carry off a sheep or a calf or a man. A Thunderbird.

But does such a creature really exist? The evidence would seem to indicate that it does. Allowing for a normal amount of magnification induced by fear, hysteria, and vivid imagination in the frequently recorded encounters between bird and man, there has to be some substance to the stories. Farmers, businessmen, airline pilots, doctors—respectable, sane citizens from all walks of life—cannot all be written off as eccentrics or liars.

Nesting on craggy pinnacles in desolate mountain sections of North America are birds of a size that few humans have ever seen or imagined.

Is it possible that these birds are oversized eagles whose glands have gone wacky, the way human glands sometimes run wild and produce giants 10-feet tall? The American Museum of

Natural History scoffs at this idea, claiming that the largest eagle ever reported in the United States had a wingspan of 10 feet. It qualifies this statement, however, nothing that "incompetent" witnesses have sworn that they have seen eagles with wingspans of up to 20 feet.

What about a condor?

There is some evidence to support this theory. Ornithologist R.J. Young of California believes that the giant condor, a species of vulture, or the California vulture itself may be the true Thunderbird. At one time the condor could be found in great numbers all along the west coast of North America. At present these huge birds are fast becoming extinct, victims of the same destiny that exterminated the great monsters of prehistoric times. The condor has failed to adapt to the radically changing environment of the past century. By conservative estimates, the "average" condor has a wingspan of 12 feet; its body is up to 5-feet long, fleshy and muscular; the head and neck are bare above a white collar of soft down; the beak is thick, strong, and cruelly curved. One specimen in a Chilean zoo had a wingspan of 15 feet and regularly consumed 18 pounds of raw meat as a daily diet!

Consider the plight of a wild creature that requires 18 pounds of meat a day to survive, battling to exist in our modern civilization where wild game, its natural prey, is rapidly disappearing. For centuries condors would swoop down from their craggy nests 15,000 feet above sea level to kill their food on the plains and in the valleys. But now, with cities and towns spreading out across the countryside, reducing wildlife, the condor is slowly starving to death. But there are the rare ones, the strongest, the biggest, who still inhabit the High Sierras and other lofty pinnacles in the clouds.

"Although many of my colleagues will not agree," Dr. Young states, "I would say it is not only possible but likely that certain of the species, which have endured, are great hardy creatures with wing spreads up to 25 feet." Although the condor is normally not aggressive, preferring to eat dead flesh or kill off dying animals, any species is capable of some change. As Dr. Young points out: "The timidest of creatures are converted to fighting tigers when hunger and the instinct for survival motivate them."

Therefore, it is not too preposterous to assume that a giant

condor or California vulture, maddened by hunger, might occasionally invade the lowland domain of man and carry off a fat lamb, a sheep, or even a child: This is no more unlikely than an eagle swooping down at midday on the busy, noisy streets of Chicago and laying hold of a fox terrier—which did happen in November 1962.

A condor, conceivably, might become curious about another flying thing near it in the sky. The highest and fastest flyer of all the birds, it could easily overtake a small plane cruising at moderate speed. But obviously, it could not keep pace with a modern airliner, nor could it get close to one except by accident. However, we know that somehow this did occur on November 23, 1962, when tragedy overtook the Viscount turbo approaching Washington. Some bird—a big bird—collided with the tail of that plane and demolished a 35-foot sheet of vital stabilizer. Could it have been a condor?

Even Dr. Young, who is willing to accept the idea of a 25- to 30-foot condor or vulture rejects that idea. According to the reference books there are no condors in the eastern part of North America. "To the best of our knowledge they have become extinct in the United States," says Dr. Young, "except for isolated sections of the Southwest."

Thoughtful people agree that contemporary explanations for these strange attacks and maimings certainly are needed, but question the existence of huge birds, larger than anything we imagine as native to our continent. Is there any precedent or evidence from the past for such assumptions?

In simple societies without written language, the storyteller occupies a predominant place in the tribal hierarchy. It is he who teaches the young about the heroic deeds of their ancestors, communicates the traditions of the tribe and stimulates them to deeds that will carry on this heritage. And in the tales that survive among the native people of the North American continent, monster birds appear again and again. In fact, centuries before white men came to the continent, a cult of the Thunderbird bound native tribes together in a strange, almost religious alliance. From the Bering Strait to the Isthmus of Panama, dozens of different tribal legends tell of monster birds that dwelt in high mountain fastnesses, preying on living creatures, including

men. About 1400 AD, when North America was in the grip of "The Little Big Freeze," and life—plant, animal and human—was being ravaged by ice and snow, the Thunderbird (the name appears to have originated during this period) deserted its lofty habitat and came down into the valleys seeking food. Here began the legends of the bird that carried away children and even grown men when it could not find animal food.

"Preposterous," modern, sophisticated ornithologists assert.

Still, in Southern California, while excavating in asphalt pits for fossils, geologists uncovered skeletons of Indians and bison alongside the bones of birds which, when reconstructed, resembled huge vultures with an estimated wingspan of over 25 feet. The folklore of this region tells of a Thunderbird that attacked a beached whale and literally ripped it apart, carrying great hunks of blubber off into the mountains.

Allowing for a certain amount of deistic exaggeration (for the Thunderbird was regarded as a god), the number and consistency of such stories, spread among many scattered tribes over the length and breadth of the entire continent, suggests that a "super bird" such as the Thunderbird did exist.

That such a monster came to be called the Thunderbird and was regarded as a deity is quite natural. The ancients of the Americas, like their counterparts in Greece, Rome, and Scandinavia, understandably created a god for every unexplained phenomenon of nature, so after a few centuries they had sea gods, rain gods, fire gods, and, of course, thunder gods. In the simple reasoning of the Indians and the Eskimos, thunder and lightning came from the sky and the giant bird came from the sky, too. It seemed natural that the rush of his powerful wings churned up thunder; the blinking of his golden eyes flashed forks of lightning.

Primitive art throughout the North American continent found a common motif in the Thunderbird. His visage is easily recognizable atop totem poles, on leather shields and tepees, and in the crude drawings on cave walls. Most of the representations of the Thunderbird are strikingly similar. The American Indian's depiction of it is as good a criterion as any. It is surprisingly modern in its geometric design, and bears a marked resemblance to the American eagle, except that the Indians made

a clear distinction between the "big" eagle and the "monster" Thunderbird.

The 18th and 19th centuries provide countless stories of huge birds attacking farm animals and human beings. Most of them came from campfire sessions among hunters and mountain men who spent a lifetime in the Rocky Mountains or the Appalachians. The famous scout Jim Bridger described how a "giant bird, too big for either an eagle or a vulture," attacked a tethered mule and lifted it off the ground. Bridger and a companion held onto the animal's legs, and eventually the bird loosened its grip and flew away.

Daniel Boone claimed to have seen a Thunderbird carry away a five-year-old Indian boy. A dozen arrows and a volley of shots were supposedly pumped into the creature without effect. But campfire tales, primed by freely circulating jugs of "white lightning" and the natural tendency of strong men to outdo each other even in storytelling, cannot be taken too seriously.

But other reports cannot be ignored. In the year 1886, the Tombstone, Arizona *Epitaph*, which helped make Wyatt Earp famous, published a photograph of a huge bird nailed to a wall. The newspaper said it had been shot by two prospectors and hauled into town by wagon. Lined up in front of the bird were six grown men with their arms outstretched, fingertip to fingertip. The creature measured about 36 feet from wingtip to wingtip.

In 1889, a group of revelers at the Oriental Saloon in Tombstone got to talking about that picture and made fun of the two prospectors who claimed to have killed the bird. By chance, one of the old silver hunters was standing down at the far end of the bar. "If you're so damned smart," he challenged them, "why don't you go out where we got the bird. There's plenty more of 'em nesting in the tops of them mountains. You'll see for yourselves."

The party of happy drunks took off at once for the scene where, allegedly, the Thunderbird had been shot. By the time they reached the spot, it was almost dawn and the whisky was beginning to wear off. The fun seemed to have gone out of the adventure. With aching heads, they built a fire and rolled up in their blankets to sleep it off.

Just as they were dozing off, one of the men got up and

went into the bushes to relieve himself. Minutes later, a terrified scream sent the others bolting out of their bed rolls, wide awake.

"God help me! It's got me!" the unseen man in the woods screamed. "Aghhhhh!"

Grabbing rifles and pistols, the men ran in the direction of the screaming man, believing that a bear or some other wild animal had attacked him. In the first gray light they could make out his footprints in the damp earth, leading to a clearing in the woods. Suddenly the men stopped dead. The footprints ended abruptly in the middle of the clearing. They looked at each other in bewilderment.

"What the hell," one man said nervously. "He disappeared into thin air."

Instinctively, they all looked upwards, and, almost as if this gesture was a signal, the terrible screaming, which had ceased for a few moments, now started again—only this time it came from directly over their heads, high in the air.

"Let me go, lemme go, lemme gooo...." Gradually, it faded into the distance.

Shaken, wild-eyed, but sober, all four men who were present later signed sworn statements testifying to the truth of this incident.

One of the most eerie Thunderbird incidents occurred in 1944, in a California internment camp where Nisei, Americans of Japanese origin, were held during World War II. Over a period of months, more than a half-dozen internees disappeared from this camp, and it was thought they had escaped. In the course of the thorough interrogation that followed, to figure out how the Nisei had escaped and who had helped them, the only thing investigators could get out of the other internees was that a "giant bird" had carried off the missing men. The angry soldiers assumed that they were being "taken" by the Japanese Americans, who had been fraternizing with local Indians working around the camp. These Indians habitually told wild stories about a monster bird that lurked in the lofty mountain peaks. This opinion was reinforced when two of the Indians rushed into camp one morning, shouting excitedly that they had seen a Thunderbird kill and carry off a man the night before.

This particular camp had enjoyed a minimum of security

until then, because the inmates were "good risks." But from this point on it bristled with machine guns and watch towers, double guard details and powerful searchlights ringing the fence at night. The prisoners stopped disappearing and the matter ended there —temporarily.

Usually when Japanese American internees escaped from the camps, they would be picked up again in days or weeks, while trying to sneak in or out of the homes of friends or mingling self-consciously in Chinese sections, hoping they would be accepted by their brother Orientals. It rarely worked.

Strangely, none of the internees who escaped from this camp ever turned up again—during the war or after. They had, literally and figuratively, disappeared into thin air! So claimed their fellow inmates—and the Indians.

These stories are typical of many reported through the first half of the 20th century in mountain states, both west and east. Pennsylvania is, significantly, one of the most popular sources of Thunderbird sightings. Just recently one of these reports was received by *Saga* from a Pennsylvania resident who wrote: "...In April, 1922, I was standing at my gate alone after the sun had gone behind the mountain when a bird, which I first thought was a blue heron, flew overhead with a slow, flapping motion of its wings. As it was lighter in color than a heron, I watched it fly past a pine tree with branches that spanned 50 feet. Its wingspread was two-thirds the width of that pine. For 35 years I never mentioned the incident for fear someone would think I was crazy. Then, on March 27, 1957, a young man rushed into my house shouting excitedly. 'There's a bird flying around out there and it's a monster!'

"The bird had disappeared by the time I got out of the house, so I went back inside and made a phone call to the local American Legion Post. I asked the steward there if he had heard anything about a big bird flying toward the Susquehanna River. He said he hadn't, but went outside to ask the crowd in the street. A chorus of people answered him, saying that they had seen it fly across the river at Westport, Pennsylvania. The consensus was that it had a wingspread of at least 25 feet.... One week later another Thunderbird flew over my house and was later sighted flying up Halls Run...."

Let's return for a moment to the Indian legends of the Thunderbird. Folklore tells us that when the native tribes of North America migrated east as the Little Big Freeze slanted down across the continent from the northwest, they encountered a multitude of Thunderbirds while crossing the mountains. The predator birds, always ravenous, killed many braves, squaws, and Indian children. In retaliation, hunting parties sought out their nests and ruthlessly destroyed both the eggs and the young of the Thunderbird. The Indians noted particularly that the Thunderbird was not a nesting bird, by conventional nesting standards—including those of the eagle. Frequently the Thunderbird's eggs and young lay on crude beds of sticks on the bare mountain tops, with no protection from the elements. This may be the vital clue to the identity of the mysterious Thunderbird, for it is a fact that the condor is the only existing bird in the world whose nesting habits follow this pattern.

So, in their westward movement, the Indians exterminated as many of these big birds as they could discover. Certainly no one would suggest that they could have destroyed all of them. The surviving Thunderbirds—or condors—gradually died off as a result of the natural attrition described earlier. But can even an expert be absolutely certain that every last one of them died? It seems quite possible that on some remote, inaccessible peak of the Appalachian Mountains a hardy strain of the breed has endured. A dozen, ten, perhaps fewer, but certainly strong, wily birds who could survive where the rest of their species was dying out.

Some people, although they live in the areas where people have been attacked, refute their own neighbors' evidence—but are unable to offer any explanation for the terrible wounds inflicted. Others scoff at the reports, snorting: "Ah, that's just another Loch Ness Monster or Abominable Snowman that nobody's ever seen! It'll end up like the Cardiff Giant—and just as phony."

Neither hasty acceptance nor stubborn hooting at the facts makes sense. Only after thorough investigation of every new sighting and monster bird incident, and scientific analysis of the facts, will we come close to an acceptable answer. For sophisticated people of the mid-20th century, contemplating visits to other planets within a decade, must have the answer

when forms of life from the savage past seem unwilling to die out even in the alien conditions of our glass-and-neon civilization.